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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes a study designed to determine if students understand the concept of democracy and can apply democratic principles. It also compares the study with related investigations conducted in Europe and calls for improved teaching to make the concept of democracy comprehensible. In 1974, 1,000 high school seniors in Pennsylvania participated in a study conducted by the Survey Research Institute of Temple University. The study is based on the rational-activist model of democracy which asserts that government responds to the majority but protects the minority and that citizens keep informed, participate in party politics, and resort to political activism when necessary. Results show students not only have great difficulty in articulating what they understood about democracy, but also have a simplistic, narrow, and ethnocentric view of democracy. Personal freedoms and representative government are recognized, but collective goals, the necessity of party conflict, and the interrelationship of the principles of democracy are not understood. Students with a better understanding of democracy participate more in political activism. However, there is no significant correlation between a student's grasp of the concept of democracy and his ability to apply democratic principles when presented with hypothetical conflict situations. Two related studies conducted in Austria and in 11 democratic nations of Western Europe show similar results. It is concluded that democracy as a concept is comprehensible when it is effectively taught. (Author/LAA)

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STUDENTS COMPREHENSION OF DEMOCRACY
AND ITS APPLICATION TO CONFLICT SITUATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

"... the existence of democracies depends, other things being equal, on the popularization of the idea of democracy in the sense that a clear understanding of what democracy is about is a major condition for behaving democratically." (Sartori, 1976, p.5) However, Sartori continues, "... democracy is more complex and intricate than any other political form, paradoxically it may not survive if its principles and mechanism are not within the intellectual reach of the average man." If Sartori is correct -- and most American educators tend to talk as though he were -- then it is imperative that democratic regimes and their agents (such as the schools and the mass media) make strenuous efforts to bring the concept within the reach of most average men since "obviously no one is born supporting democracy." (Abramson and Hennessey, 1970, p.239, *Italics mine*).

Precisely because support for democracy is learned behavior, the schools in West Germany and the United States have been charged with the responsibility of educating their pupils for democratic citizenship. The question which remains is whether the educational process has accomplished this, and secondly, whether such comprehension, as Sartori suggests, forms a foundation for democratic citizen behavior. In an attempt to shed some light on this topic I would like today to report to you on a study conducted in the U.S. which addresses itself to these two questions. Whenever possible I'll draw on relevant material from Germany and other European democracies.

The rational-activist theory of democracy. Inasmuch as democracy is not only a complex and intricate political concept but also one which embraces an extraordinarily wide range of practices and norms, it is, of course, impossible

to touch on all or even most of these. Consequently I had to be highly selective in singling out certain facets of democracy while ignoring others. What I chose for the focus of my inquiry was what has come to be labeled the rational-activist model (Verba, 1965). I have chosen this particular model because it is also the model prevalent in most American high school texts, especially civics texts, in the mass media, and in the public rhetoric.

At the risk of belaboring the obvious, let me briefly (and superficially) summarize those aspects of the model which are most frequently stressed and which pertain directly to our inquiry. One of its main features is that government must rest on the will of the majority and be responsive to it. But it must also protect the rights of the minority as well as the rights and individual freedoms of all citizens. Beyond agreement on such basic principles, citizens are free to disagree with each other and to pursue different and even conflicting interests. The model in fact assumes that citizens might frequently find themselves at odds with each other and with the policies enacted by government. It has prescriptions for the democratic way of resolving such conflicts. The conflict aspect of democracy tends to be deemphasized in instructional materials at the elementary and secondary school levels in spite of the fact that its recognition is vital for a genuine understanding of democracy.*

* Sartori (1976, p.15) objects to the idea that "the basis of democracy is not consensus, but indeed conflict. This strikes me as a reckless use of terminology." He would substitute for conflict the term "dissent". His notion of dissent, however, varies very little, if at all, from the pluralist's notion of conflict (in distinction to cleavage).

In order to keep government responsive, the model makes heavy demands on the citizen. He is expected to keep an eye on government and to do his part to guide and control it by taking an interest in politics, keeping informed and participating at all levels of government. Political apathy is seen as the antithesis of democratic citizenship.* It is particularly unacceptable when, in the eyes of the citizen, government embarks on a course which harms him/her or the community. Under those circumstances political activism becomes a civic duty not to be shirked. The avenues for activism, in turn, are numerous and varied.** Although citizens are not supposed to suffer in silence, they are also not supposed to resort to illegal or violent means where legal ones are available. Civil disobedience and violence are seen as court of last resort.***

Scope of the study. Students' comprehension and application of the rational-activist model will be the point of departure for my report today. In it I will focus on their comprehension of the concept political democracy and under what circumstances they intend to behave consonant with the principles of this concept. For this latter part I have chosen hypothetical conflict situations in which the young person finds himself/herself at odds with the authorities. These are the types of circumstances which are tests of a person's propensity for active citizenship and indirectly of his/her attachment to democratic norms.

* Berelson (1954) and others who reject or modify the model of the rational-activist citizen see positive functions in the apathy of the mass public.

** Several attempts have recently been made to develop typologies of modes of democratic activism. Among them Verba and Nie (1972), Kaase and Marsh (1976), and Sigel (1973 and 1976).

***The debate on the role of civil disobedience is a good deal more complicated than the above simple statement would suggest.

By choosing such focus it will not always be possible to compare results with those from previous studies, especially the very early socialization ones, since the latter tended to focus on attachment to specific authorities (the President, the Queen, Parliament, etc.) or on rather general affect or preference for democracy, the law, etc. My aim today is to emphasize instead the cognitive aspects of the topic and to relate it to behavioral predispositions.*

Study Design. In the spring of 1974 the Survey Research Institute of Temple University drew a sample of twenty-five public schools of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania was chosen because it contains urban, suburban, and rural regions and has a heavy ethnic and religious population mixture quite characteristic of the rest of the United States. One thousand high school seniors in these twenty-five schools were interviewed privately by interviewers of the Survey Institute. The average length of the interview was 45 minutes. In addition one questionnaire (containing mostly personality variables) was filled out by the student immediately after completion of the interview. Two months later a lengthy written questionnaire was also filled out by the students while assembled en masse. Unfortunately about one hundred fifty students failed to fill out this last part either because the instruments did not reach the school in time, conflict with examination schedules, and other problems.

* This type of approach is well presented in the work of Richard Merelman (1966, 1969, 1971).

RESULTS

Comprehension of Democracy. The first and perhaps least surprising result concerns the great difficulty students experienced in articulating what they understood by the word democracy. Not that the term was strange or unfamiliar to them (as it seems to be for British youngsters, see Dennis et al, 1968). Quite the contrary. When confronted with the hypothetical situation of having a student from a foreign, non-democratic country asking them to explain what makes a country a democracy, few high schoolers were at a loss for words. Almost reflexively they offered explanations which indicated that they associated democracy with one or another key concept or practice. Most frequently they referred to individual freedom (religion, speech, travel, career choice) and/or to popular government although in the latter too the personal freedom aspect was heavily stressed as though the main characteristic of democracy were that it leaves the citizen alone.

-- TABLE I ABOUT HERE --

The facility with which students answered the question turned out to be somewhat misleading. The probe which followed the initial answer indicates that these answers frequently were not symptomatic of real comprehension. Rather they constitute key words or slogans which students have come to associate with the term democracy. In the probe the student was asked why he/she thought the selected feature(s) was(were) so vital for democracy. If we exempt the small group (5%) who candidly admitted "I really don't understand it myself. I wouldn't know" and the somewhat larger (9%) whose answers have nothing or

little to do with the topic (whose answers were coded as "wrong"), we still find a very large group whose answers -- while neither wrong nor ignorant -- lack much content or genuine understanding (see Table II). We labelled these answers as simplistic. Simplistic answers often constituted nothing but an elaboration of the original reply. A student originally opting for individual freedom now explains the importance of freedom for personal development without much reference to politics except the need to "follow the constitution which gives you the rights to do what you want." Freedom of speech is associated with "the right to tell the government how you feel about the situation. If you don't have those there is no democracy." Forty-four percent of the pupils could not go beyond this, even after two probes.

-- TABLE II ABOUT HERE --

Another quarter showed a greater awareness of the interconnection of several of the principles or processes but here too no one could elaborate beyond their initial definition although that definition was considerably more complex and richer. Examples of the code category "more complex" are:

The idea of freedoms. Equality. People govern themselves. People make up the government. People control the government, not government control of the people. Free enterprise. Being able to express your opinion without some kind of reprisal. That's all. (Why important?) Those are the things democracy stands for. That's what democracy means. People can say what they want in office and vote. We have freedoms; we can do what we want so long as we don't take away other people's rights. We can move; we don't have to do what an official says; we can disagree. (Why important?) If we didn't have freedoms people would have to be controlled somehow. So dictatorship might appear.

Finally we have a small group of students whose answers we characterized as sophisticated because they not only associated democracy with more than one

feature but they were able to explain the interrelation of the features as well as the relation of individual freedoms to collective authority. For example:

People have a lot of freedom. The government tries to work for the people. If you don't like something you can try and get it changed without being punished. You are supposed to be represented in the government. (Why important?) People are supposed to be represented in the government and without freedom to express themselves the representatives wouldn't know how to act on issues. That's all. Voting for the people that we want in our government. Having a say in it. Well, by being able to put who we want in to represent our ideas. Well, the government can't take your basic rights away from you. Freedom of religion, speech. Anything that lets you be free but not free to take anyone else's rights away. (Why important?) By electing your official you prevent one person, one man from gaining more and more power that leads to dictatorship. That way your rights are guaranteed and no one will be able to take them away from you. By the freedom of speech, new and better ideas will come about and everyone can benefit by these ideas. The country keeps moving and isn't hindered in anyway.

Clearly, this type of response represents a better definition than the other types. Not only do we get the idea that these students see several different aspects of democracy, but also some effort is made to tie these aspects together to make sense out of them. For example, the necessity of the vote to prevent dictatorship, freedom of speech so that one can be represented and that new ideas may spread -- all these represent some level of understanding democracy and its elements. Whether or not I was justified in labeling this level as sophisticated is, of course, open to debate. In many ways, as I shall show in a later section, even the sophisticates lacked genuine understanding and had trouble applying the concept. But compared to the rest of the students they were certainly more sophisticated.

In general we must conclude that most students exhibit a certain amount of cognizance of some democratic principles but it is not at all clear that they comprehend the meaning and the implications of them. At times one cannot

help but think that these are slogans only. Even rarer are the students who take cognizance of a variety of principles and relate them meaningfully to each other. I doubt, however, that the relatively meager comprehension of democracy is due to our respondents' youth. In all probability adults in the U.S. -- and no doubt in other countries too -- would encounter equal difficulties. The type of answer these young people give shows democracy to be popular but its popularity seems to rest less on a cohesive image of a political system and what it can do and more on the negative notion of what democracies must not do. Individual freedom and self-actualization rather than collective goals dominate students' views of democracy.

It is difficult to compare our findings with European ones because most of the studies with which I am familiar used very different items to investigate comprehension and -- what is perhaps more critical -- tended to use a structured question format in which a respondent was either asked to agree or disagree with a given definition of democracy, or he/she was offered a checklist and asked to choose items which characterize democracy. Such procedures, I hope to demonstrate by my findings, have a tendency to create an impression of greater comprehension than actually prevails in the young minds. Those caveats notwithstanding, I feel certain that the European studies also point to rather shallow understanding of the concept. In fact recent studies in Austria* and West Germany**

* Kramer and Kramer (1975?) report on the 1973 Austrian youth survey (conducted by IMAS).

** Data were made available to me through the kind cooperation -- which is much appreciated -- of the Zentralarchiv für Empirische Sozialforschung in Cologne and of the Forschungstelle für Jugendfragen in Hannover. Other data come from the European Consortium for Comparative Research. For earlier studies of German youth, see Jaide (1960, 1963).

have lead me to believe that in these countries confusion and ambivalence might be even more pronounced.* After all, democracy, as Sartori pointed out, is a "complex and intricate" institution. Whether or not the schools, the mass media, and other societal institutions have done enough to make it more comprehensible, to bring it "within the intellectual reach of the average man" is another question -- a question which urgently needs to be answered but which is well beyond the scope of this paper.

Ethnocentricity. Not only do our Pennsylvania students display a rather simplistic and shallow comprehension of democracy but it is also rather provincial or ethnocentric. By this I mean to indicate that they tend to equate democracy with the U.S. political system and practices. In their eyes our constitutional system is what democracy is all about. They apparently fail to see that it is but one application of democratic principles and that democracy can appear in many forms.

I base this conclusion on the results from students' answers to a checklist of nine common American institutions and practices. Students were asked to distinguish between those which are absolutely essential for democracy and those which are not ("even though they may be desirable"). Most students found few if any American practices to be non-essential. More disturbing, they failed to distinguish between certain historically developed institutions and genuine principles of democracy. For example, such typical American institutions as

* Dennis et al made this point in 1968, but even more recent studies (Kramer & Kramer) show great ambivalence in Austria and a tendency toward polarization in Germany (Adelson et al, 1970).

trial by jury and a written constitution were almost unanimously judged to be essential for democracy (94% and 90% respectively), whereas such a basic principle as majority rule was so judged by fewer -- 82%. Only one-half percent of the student population could accurately distinguish between essential and non-essential features or practices, whereas 38% equated all American practices with democracy. This provincialism to me indicates not only lack of comprehension of democracy but probably reflects on the inadequate and perhaps parochial guidance given the public.

-- TABLE III ABOUT HERE --

Students with generally good comprehension of democracy -- those we had labeled as sophisticates -- have considerably less trouble in deciding what is essential (57% scored high on the overall knowledge of essentials measure) whereas only 14% of those without knowledge of democracy scored high. Nonetheless the sophisticates did not do significantly better in making these distinctions than did those students whose answers we had characterized as simplistic or more complex (38% and 47% respectively scored high). While the relationships are all in the predicted direction, no case can be made that a sophisticated comprehension of democracy contributes significantly to recognizing the essential features of democracy.

Conflict Orientations. In the beginning I had stated that genuine comprehension of democracy involved recognition of the inevitability of conflict and dissent. Let me now turn to the acceptance of conflict. To measure it I utilized two separate indicators. One was Dennis's three items' scale of support for a

competitive party system (1968) which essentially tests respondent's recognition that party competition and party conflict, far from being incompatible with democracy, actually are an essential ingredient.* Those who clearly recognize this, i.e. make the democratic choice each time, constitute a distinct minority (22%) but so do those who reject the notion of partisanship (19%). Instead our young people show considerable ambivalence and frequently seek refuge in a "no opinion" answer (see Table IV). In only one instance does this ambivalence disappear: three quarters reject the idea that "we would be better off if we had only one political party." Parties may not be very popular but one-party rule apparently is even less appealing. Quite possibly young people have come to associate the latter with dictatorships. Rather than accept that, they are willing to put up with party strife although they are most uncertain of the beneficiality of it.** In this respect the young people are very much like the adults in another Dennis study (1964). They too were willing to put up with party strife without showing much enthusiasm for parties.

-- TABLE IV ABOUT HERE --

Those who lack any comprehension of democracy have the greatest difficulty in accepting the need for party competition. On an index which combines all

* For the specific items, see Table IV.

**Dennis et al (1968) findings for eleventh graders in Milwaukee, Wisconsin showed far greater support for the party system than did our students. In part the differences may be a function of sampling differences, their population being exclusively urban. But there probably also are real differences due to the change in political climate in the U.S. since then. Documentation is quite conclusive that today's adolescents are much more cynical than they were ten or twenty years ago (Bachman, 1971).

three items, only 18% scored high on partisan acceptance. In contrast 50% of the sophisticates managed to score high. But again the difference between the three levels of comprehension (simplistic, more complex, and sophisticated) did not account for any significant differences in partisan acceptance. It is as though those students who previously could not associate anything (or anything accurate) with the term democracy are also unable to detect democratic situations or principles when presented with them. Conversely it seems that those who have some notion what democracy is all about and those who have fairly good knowledge of it all experience not too dissimilar difficulties when called to decide what the democratic solution is.

Exact comparison with European youth studies again are difficult to come by. Some ten years earlier Dennis et al used the same scale in studying youth in Italy, Germany, England, and the U.S. They concluded "... that despite the continued moderate and ambiguous support for the party system by American children, relative to children in the other three nations ... the party system receives widespread support in the U.S."

Not only do American children, as we just indicated, seem to have lessened their support but more recent European data -- while utilizing different measures -- would nonetheless suggest that the differences among the nations have decreased. Findings from the eleven nations study (Allerbeck, Rosenmayr, and Jennings, 1976) and the 1976 Jaide one suggest that in Europe too young people have come to accept -- perhaps just as grudgingly -- the necessity for parties and partisan conflict. If anything German youth seems to understand

this better than youth elsewhere.*

The second indicator of students' ability to apply democratic principles to real political institutions or situations was designed by me and labeled democratic dilemmas. It consisted of three situations where the application of democratic rules or processes might benefit a person whom the student (or the public) might consider undesirable.** The student was asked to decide if the authorities should nonetheless apply democratic principles in dealing with him/her. Clearly the democratic solution of the dilemma is to let democracy prevail.

Examining student reaction to the three items, situation by situation demonstrates that students have no difficulty whatsoever in making the democratic choice for two of the three situations. Better than 3/4 (79%) have no doubt that the confessed killer who was caught in the act still should have a regular trial and that a speaker from a revolutionary group should be allowed to address high school students. Fewer than one-fifth oppose either solution. The situation which caused uncertainty in students' minds concerned the propriety of permitting a known alcoholic to serve as town mayor even if he was the choice of the majority. Thirty-eight percent were ready to abide by the will of the majority; 43% were not and 20% were uncertain. Presumably students here were torn between safeguarding the general welfare (as they saw it) and abiding by majority rule. Ironically this very situation, which may seem so farfetched, had had at

* Marginals from the codebooks of the previously mentioned German studies show that anti-party feelings seldom exceed 25%.

** For the specific items see Table V.

least two recent precedents in real life when young drug users or addicts were elected to local offices and had been permitted to assume office. Students either did not know of these precedents or ignored them as guidelines. With the exception of the uncertainty displayed in this situation, students demonstrated a rather unequivocal preference for democratic solutions.

-- TABLE V ABOUT HERE --

Students whose democratic comprehension is more sophisticated again scored somewhat higher or more democratic on all three items when the three were combined in a composite index (Table V-B) but the differences again were not statistically significant. We thus find ourselves confronted with a paradox. Students differ from each other in their ability to explain the meaning of democracy but they differ much less from each other when it comes to applying this ability to specific political questions.

Is there an explanation for this seeming paradox? One explanation might well be that the three knowledge categories which I have created (simplistic, more complex, and sophisticated) are false distinctions -- that the three groups do not vary greatly from each other in comprehension. That may well be although I feel confident that had you been asked to create distinct response categories, you would probably have categorized them similarly.

Without wanting to absolve myself of having made overly fine distinctions I rather think the explanation for the above paradox must be sought elsewhere. Certain items on the Dennis party democracy index and on my democratic dilemma one evoked or actually named certain key democratic phrases or slogans -- such

as free speech, one party rule, right to trial -- which are familiar to almost all students whether they know much or little about democracy. Consequently a majority opts for them. When the choice is less clear, those whose comprehension of democracy is better, also do better in making the democratic choice. Yet even they do not make this choice unerringly. It is important to repeat that on all three indices (essentials of democracy, party democracy, democratic dilemmas) sizeable proportions of sophisticates fail to score high (i.e. make the democratic choice most of or all the time). The implication of this finding, I think, is clear: even the best informed high schoolers have at best a very superficial and vague understanding of democracy.

To summarize the findings so far I would conclude that all students respond positively, i.e. democratically, to very well publicized stimuli, such as free elections, majority rule, etc., but it is rather doubtful that such democratic reaction is indicative of much more than a learned response to a highly familiar and socially desirable stimulus.

Active Citizenship

The Sartori quotation at the beginning of this report alleged that "a clear understanding of what democracy is about is a major condition for behaving democratically." Just how democratic do our students plan to behave once they have reached full political citizenship status? What would they do if they found themselves in conflict with government or felt harmed by it? Conflict situations constitute a good test of attachment to the rational-activist citizen model. It stipulates that citizens make some effort to guide and influence government and above all that they not suffer in silence when feeling aggrieved. Are our students

willing to make such effort? If so, are they willing to engage in activities which might be time-consuming, strenuous, and perhaps even risky?

To answer that question I constructed four hypothetical situations -- one very general* and three very specific ones. The first specific one assumed that the governor was revoking all drivers' licenses of people under 21 years of age. The second portrayed a city government unwilling to interfere with a toy factory whose pollution constituted a serious health hazard. The last situation saw Congress contemplating laws which would impose severe sanctions (including confinement) on people criticizing the government. My notion (only partially corroborated) was that the three specific situations presented different threat magnitudes with the revocation of the driver's license having the least threat potential and the prison one the most.

Students first were presented with the situation and asked how they would react to it or feel about it. Thus no suggestion was made that action was expected of them. After that the question was followed by a structured probe which offered them ten different activities that people might or had engaged in under the circumstances. The respondent was asked to select only those activities he/she would definitely engage in and those he/she would definitely not engage in.

*Students were told: "Let's imagine that the government enacted a policy that you and many people thought was very bad for the country. Although you know many people are opposed to the policy, nothing seems to be happening. If such a case arose, how likely is it that you would actually do something about it?" The initial answer was followed by a probe into a variety of possible behaviors.

I had assumed that the willingness to influence government would increase with the perceived magnitude or seriousness of the threat. As willingness increased, I further assumed, so would the inclination to use many different influence techniques, including some generally conceded to be unconventional (such as protests, demonstrations, boycotts, etc.). Finally, I thought that in all four situations students would conjecture that they will not endure injustice passively but would do something. I thought that total apathy would be the exception but that activities would be restricted to conventional and relatively low effort ones; unconventional behaviors being reserved for very serious threat situations.

In general this was the case. In all instances almost all students spontaneously mentioned some action or expressed their anger without specifying what, if anything, they would do about it. During the probe most of the "angry ones" as well as the initial "activists" suggested several things they would do to influence government. A minority expressed an unwillingness to do anything (driver's license 17%; pollution 23%; imprisonment 38%).* Contrary to my prediction unwillingness to exert pressure (as well as willingness) increased with the threat of the situation. Further probing revealed that among the passive pupils unwillingness was the result of fear of retributions and/or incredulity that such a thing would happen or conviction that action would not do any good anyway. This passivity, however, all but vanished when specific actions were suggested. Then only 5% remained certain they would do nothing or very little. Such abrupt shift illustrates the great caution ^{with} which we must rely on structured answers to

* In the general situation 22% thought it somewhat unlikely that they would act and 7% not at all likely.

structured questions. In this instance it is quite doubtful that the shift in activity level is indicative of a genuine propensity to participate.

For activist students, much as I had thought, the number and variety of contemplated actions increased as the situation became more threatening. Most importantly, as the perceived threat increased, so did students' willingness to use increasingly more forceful countermeasures. Short of outright violence almost all types of unconventional political behavior became acceptable in the prison situation. In response to that situation students would engage in protests, demonstrations, boycotts, and civil disobedience in addition to such conventional activities as visiting officials, writing letters, organizing or joining pressure groups.

Parenthetically I might add that peaceful demonstrations no longer are viewed as typically unconventional behavior. Demonstrations along with petitions loaded on the same factor as visiting officials and writing letters to one's representatives but related negatively to violence and disobedience. Apparently they are now conceived as "democratic participation between elections" as Etzioni (1970) so aptly put it. In that respect our American young people differ sharply from those on the continent where petitions and demonstrations loaded exclusively on the unconventional behavior factor (Kaase and Marsh, 1976).

-- TABLE VI ABOUT HERE --

Lest the above discussion create the impression that young people reflexively gravitate toward unconventional behavior, let me state here that conventional behaviors are the preferred ones in all situations. Letter writing, joining or

working for pressure groups, and voting tend to head the list of preferred activities.

These findings are not too unlike those reported a decade earlier by the Chicago and Michigan groups which commented on the perhaps inordinate reliance of students on letter writing and the vote. Where our findings differ somewhat from them is: (1) In the 1970's even high school students seem to have acquired an enlarged repertoire of political acts, many of which would have been considered highly unorthodox fifteen years earlier. (2) Students' behavior choices showed considerable variability across situations. For example, letter writing was chosen as the preferred mode in the licensing case; whereas visiting local officials was chosen in the pollution case. Apparently, students are aware that different situations call for different political measures for maximum effectiveness. They seem to say that a boycott might be most effective in getting a factory to alter its manufacturing process but how can one boycott a repressive government? Civil disobedience, on the other hand, cannot deal with a private agency, such as the polluting factory but might be effective with government. Such selectivity in choosing appropriate means points to a fair amount of political sophistication on the part of our respondents. It leads me to conclude that if the just reported findings prove anything, it is the importance of specifying the context or situation in which we wish to have our respondent place himself or herself before giving us an answer.

Much as Sartori had implied, comprehension of democracy is related to behaving like a democratic citizen. Students high in democratic comprehension project that they will expand efforts to influence government in legitimate (conventional and unconventional) ways (40% score high); whereas those who were

unable to explain democracy contemplate being inactive (57% score low on the activism index). The differences between the three groups which are "knowledgeable" about democracy again are not great but they are in the predicted direction; as comprehension about democracy increases, so does the willingness to control government.*

Comparisons across nations are possible for this question. Both the eleven nations study and the Jaide one report what students say they might do when confronted with a bad governmental policy, and the Austrian one (1973) reports students' reactions to demonstrations. Austrian youth express the most reluctance to become active and are especially unwilling to engage in unconventional behaviors. German and American youths are about equally protest-prone with the Germans slightly more so (a finding corroborated in the Jaide sample). U.S. respondents, on the other hand, are considerably more prone than Europeans to contact representatives, write them, and join pressure groups. Violence in all nations is all but rejected as a means of controlling government.

* Similar results were observed when relating current or past political behavior to levels of comprehension. Students were presented with a checklist of fourteen activities and asked whether and how often they had engaged in each. While general levels of activism were predictably low, activism increased monotonically with comprehension, so that the "sophisticates" were over twice as likely to fall into the high participatory class. Low overall levels of participation notwithstanding, U.S. respondents showed higher levels of youthful political expressivism and participation than European ones, especially as far as community and school politics were concerned.

SUMMARY

Our findings suggest that American highschoolers have some familiarity with the concept democracy and associate it primarily with the exercise of their personal freedoms and secondarily with representative government (without, however, showing much awareness of the latter). What they seem to be lacking is the understanding how these various aspects interrelate with each other. Above all, they lack any comprehension of democracy as a political system which rests on the interrelation of several highly complex and often seemingly paradoxical principles. They seem unaware of the inner tension contained in the system. Finally their view of democracy is highly colored by their American experience, and they equate the subspecie American democracy with the specie democracy.

Those whose understanding of democracy is best developed experience less difficulty in applying democratic solutions to political problems and in accepting the necessity of conflict. They are also somewhat more likely to engage in active citizenship behavior, especially when they see their self-interest or that of the community as being threatened. Even among these so-called sophisticates, however, comprehension of democracy is anything but sophisticated.

DISCUSSION

Our results permit at least three different interpretations. The first one would argue that the concept of democracy is indeed, as Sartori suggested, a highly complex and intricate one and that it is too difficult for most people, especially most young and politically inexperienced people. Another version of this same interpretation would be that the concept itself need not be too difficult but that the way in which academicians go about measuring it is unnecessarily difficult if not outright obfuscating. If the latter should be true, the task upon us would be simple: Back to the drawing board! Let's redesign our measures in a way that the average person can handle them!* Without rejecting the implication that our measures may be in need of revision, I reject the idea of simplification. Democracy just is not a simple idea and to reduce it to that brings us back into the realm of slogans discussed earlier in this report.

A third interpretation would be that difficult concepts and highly abstract problems require particularly skillful teaching techniques which -- by bringing these problems into the realm of everyday experiences -- challenge students to think in terms of principles and their application to real problems. Too often such teaching is precisely what is lacking. Reports from West Germany indicate that teachers are not trained in the topic and frequently resent having to teach it (Teschner). In the United States there is training in the field but it too suffers from unimaginative teaching (emphasizing structure rather

*Max Kaase makes this point in a 1970 IPSA paper when speaking of a democracy scale designed by him..."it can be argued that the democracy scale as it now stands is only able to measure democratic attitudes of a highly educated population...but will break down with less educated groupings." (p.27)

than principles, memorization rather than critical thinking).** It is not surprising therefore that students in both countries (Rott, Teschner) found civics instruction uninteresting and often a waste of time.

Langton and Jennings have argued that the civics curriculum in the United States is redundant. American college students (Rott), in looking back on it, have called it the least useful topic of their highschool years, and their German peers seem to agree with them. Yet this need not be. Studies have indicated that where teaching is provocative rather than perfunctory, where it encourages students to criticize and not just to extoll current practices but to examine them in the light of democratic ideals, there students seem to leave the classroom with enriched comprehension. The Teschner study demonstrated that students who felt they had been well taught also were more interested and knowledgeable after such instruction. A study of American legislators (Prewitt, Eulau, and Zisk 1967) discovered that a sizeable segment among them got their first inspriation for public office from good social studies or civics instruction. In short, democracy as a concept is comprehensible. Good teaching can make it so.

**The critiques of civics teaching in both countries are too numerous to cite here. Many of the participants of this conference have themselves authored such reports and offered valuable inspiration for curriculum revisions.

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Table I -- Students' View of Democracy*

Individual Freedoms	48%
Equality	1%
Voice in Government	37%
Miscellaneous	6%
Don't Know	9%
	<u>101%</u>

n = 992

*In answer to the open-ended question: "Assume you've been asked to show a foreign student who just arrived in this country around your school. He has never been outside his own country before and is very interested in our form of government. His country is not considered to be a democracy, and he asks you: 'What is it that makes any country a democracy?' What would you say?"

Table II -- Level of Democratic Comprehension

Student's Definition Categorized As

No Definition Given	5%
Wrong	9%
Simple	44%
More Complex	25%
Sophisticated	16%
	<u>99%</u>

n = 992

Table III -- What Is Absolutely Essential in a Democracy?*

A. % of respondents judging the institution to be essential in any democracy

Trial by Jury	94%
More Than One Political Party	86
Separation of Powers	72
Right to Private Property	89
Good Standard of Living	62
Free Elections	92
Right to Criticize Government	91
Written Constitution	90
Principle of Majority Rule	82

n = 1000

*"To be a democracy, a country must provide certain things and opportunities. It may provide other things as well that are not essential to a democracy. Check which of the items listed you think are essential to a democracy and those which you think are not essential even though they may be desirable."

B. By Level of Democratic Comprehension

Level of Comprehension	Knowledge Level of Essentials		
	Low	Medium	High
None	7%	79%	14%
Wrong	7	65	28
Simple	6	56	38
More Complex	2	51	47
Sophisticated	3	40	57

Table IV -- Acceptance of the Necessity for Party Competition

A. <u>Item</u>	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree
1) Democracy works best where political parties compete strongly with each other.	19%	37%	44%
2) We would be better off if we had only one political party.	7	18	75
3) The conflicts among the political parties hurt our country more than they help it.	33	30	37

B. By Level of Democratic Comprehension

Democratic Comprehension

Support for Party System*

	Low	Medium	High
None	34%	45%	18%
Wrong	23	55	23
Simple	20	41	39
More Complex	22	34	47
Sophisticated	9	41	50

*summed Index of the 3 items listed in part A.

Table V -- Democratic Dilemmas

A. <u>Items</u>	Yes	No	Don't Know
1) An election is held in town. A majority of the citizens elects the town drunkard as mayor of the town. Should the director of elections refuse to swear him into office and call for a new election?	38%	43%	20%
2) In broad daylight a man kills another at a busy street corner. There are 3 witnesses to the crime, and the attacker confesses his guilt. In spite of the confession and the witnesses to the crime, should the man have a regular trial even though this delays sentencing and costs the taxpayer money?	79	19	3
3) A speaker from a revolutionary group has been invited to talk to the current events club in your school. Do you think such a speaker should be allowed in your school?	79	11	10

B. By Level of Democratic Comprehension

Level of Comprehension

Preference for Democratic Procedure*

	Low	Medium	High
None	59%	31%	10%
Wrong	45	36	19
Simple	42	36	22
More Complex	34	39	27
Sophisticated	39	35	27
	n=407	n=359	n=231

*summed Index for 3 items in Part A.

Table VI -- Projected Political Activism

A. Level* of Projected Participation in Four Hypothetical Situations

Low (n=299)	35%
Medium (n=311)	37%
High (n=236)	28%

* Summed Index Across Four Situations of the Number of Acts Students Projected Engaging in When Faced With an Undesirable Policy.

B. By Level of Democratic Comprehension

<u>Level of Comprehension</u>	<u>Level of Activism</u>		
	Low	Medium	High
None	57%	41%	2%
Wrong	49	32	19
Simple	38	36	26
More Complex	30	39	32
Sophisticated	24	37	40